Effective Ways To Reduce L1 Usage and Raise L2 Usage

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ABSTRACT

Although usage of the L1 in the language learning classroom has traditionally been discouraged, in recent years this position has been challenged with more teachers now calling for a pluralistic approach in which all of the students' lingual resources are valued in the language learning process. Under monolingual compulsory settings however, the goal is to create a 100% L2 speaking environment. However, students still tend to revert to their L1 at certain stages throughout the lesson. The author's observations, recorded in a teaching journal over a 10-week period, revealed two effective ways to reduce L1 usage and raise L2 usage; pairing up heavy L1 users with light L1 users and introducing a points-and-rewards system for L2 usage. Simple reminders from the teacher proved to be ineffective. Each student's level of participation in pair- and group-work also seems to be a factor influencing the amount of L1/L2 output generated.

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have begun to challenge the traditionally-held position that the language learning classroom should be a place in which students interact exclusively in the L2 and the notion that any L1 usage (i.e. speaking in their mother tongue) is bad. This welcome change in perspective is reflected in a number of studies (Atkinson, 1987; Hopkins, 1988; Auerbach, 1993; Doyle, 1997; Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Schweers, Jr., 1999; Levine, 2003) which have explored a more pluralistic approach in which the classroom is increasingly being perceived as a space in which L1 usage is allowed, and at times openly encouraged, so that the "potential of the mother tongue as a classroom resource" (Atkinson, 1987, p.241), is used to full advantage.

On the other hand, some researchers (Mori, 2004 et al.) have argued for what has been called the "staying-in-English rule" based on the belief that, "speaking in English as much as possible would contribute to the students' linguistic development" (Mori, 2004, p. 227). In addition, Mori also argues that another benefit of this rule is that it can serve as "a pedagogical intervention to give students the discipline needed to master a skill" (Mori, 2004, p. 228). Finally, as Bassano and others have pointed out, some "teachers are [simply] disappointed at seeing students going back to their L1" (cited in Mori, 2004, p. 226), especially if the teacher believes that the students have the capabilities to perform tasks or activities in their L2.

To sum it up briefly, there appear to be two key positions; one in which L2 interaction is prioritized (and often strictly enforced) or one in which all of the lingual resources that a student may bring to the classroom (L1, L2, L3 etc.) are valued and encouraged for the purposes of language learning. It is likely that the former position is derived from Long's well-established interaction hypothesis (Long, 1989), a seminal theory which posits that language acquisition occurs when students interact in the target language. On the other hand, others such as Fotos (2001) have argued that "L1 [is] a useful tool for conversational strategies such as repair work, seeking clarification and emphasizing a point" (as cited in Leeming, 2011, p. 362), among other things.

Irrespective of one's personal views on this matter, when Rikkyo University (Tokyo, Japan) students enroll for their first year, they are required to take an English Discussion Class (EDC) which espouses a 100% 'English-only' policy. In other words, students enter the class under "monolingual compulsory settings" (Leeming, 2011, p. 360).

In each class, students are required to conduct two full in-class discussions (10 minutes and 16 minutes long, respectively) exclusively in their L2 (English) in groups of three or four (or

sometimes five) students. During discussion tests, students are punished if they speak in their L1 (Japanese) by losing 'Participation' points. Therefore, despite the large background of literature which points to the benefits of an inclusive or pluralistic approach (L1 + L2 approach), this study focuses on various experimental pedagogical techniques and strategies to reduce the frequency of L1 usage and increase the frequency of L2 usage when an instructor is faced with "monolingual *compulsory* (my emphasis) settings". In the case of Rikkyo University freshmen, this is important so that students can successfully complete both discussions exclusively in English (one of the goals of the course) without having to revert to their L1 (Japanese).

DISCUSSION

A single English Discussion Class ('EDC'), consisting of nine Level Four students (n=9) was targeted for observation. First-year Rikkyo University students are divided into four levels from 1 to 4 for the EDC course based on their TOEIC scores, with four being the lowest. Attendance fluctuated from as few as four students in the class to a maximum of nine students (full attendance). Over the first four weeks of the course (each class taking place on a Friday morning), the instructor (the author) observed both teacher-student and student-student interactions, taking notes on the frequency of L1/L2 usage and noting occasions when students opted to code-switch back into their mother tongue.

Observed Behavior

While there did not appear to be any obvious consistent pattern that each student followed, several general observations were made. First of all, students reverted to their L1 when trying to express difficult or complex ideas or content. These moments in the class were often accompanied by pauses in the conversation, perhaps due to high cognitive load. Code-switching was often preceded by attempts at negotiation of meeting with fellow classmates using, "how do you say [Japanese word] in English"?

Secondly, although all students seemed to display similar levels of oral proficiency in English, some students chose to code-switch more frequently than others. That is to say, some students appeared less motivated to use their L2 (English) than others. Therefore, I hypothesized that high cognitive load alone was probably not the only factor influencing code-switching behavior. Finally, there was quite a variety in the levels of participation in L2 classwork when placed in pairs or groups, suggesting that the students' levels of motivation probably also varied.

Intervention

Three different types of intervention were then formulated with the hope that they would reduce the amount of L1 usage and increase the amount of L2 usage in class.

First intervention: Reminders

Based on my experience teaching other 'problematic' classes in which students frequently code-mixed, I hypothesized that simple reminders from the teacher would be ineffective. Nevertheless, I hoped that frequent reminders would result in some positive change in L2 usage.

First intervention: Observed changes

Largely in line with my hypothesis, simple verbal reminders from the instructor to students in class only appeared to have temporary benefits. While some students switched back to the L2 for the remainder of the activity after receiving reminders, these students often reverted back to their L1 in activities that took place later on.

Second intervention: Pairing/grouping students according to code-switching frequency

For the second intervention, I decided to pair up students with similar or different L1 usage frequencies (i.e. code-mixing frequencies) in order to determine if this had any positive or negative effect on the level of L1/L2 output generated.

For the pairing/grouping experiments, students were first categorized into one of four categories; very heavy L1 users (students who made several L1 utterances, at the sentence level, in every dyadic or group interaction during weeks 1-4), heavy L1 users (students who consistently made approximately one L1 utterance in both class activities and discussions during Weeks 1-4), medium L1 users (students who spoke in their L1, Japanese, in *either* activities or discussions but *not both* during Weeks 1-4) and light L1 users (students who made no more than one L1 utterance, or less, per class during Weeks 1-4). This categorization was conducted after observing the students during discussions and discussion preparation activities.

During Weeks 1-4, the author also observed and noted students' general in-class participation. There was no strict scale used to measure participation and therefore this is one limitation of these observations. Students were categorized into the categories of 'high', 'medium' or 'low' participation.

During Class 8 (my fourth entry in the journal), for the Discussion 1 preparation activity (in which students practice in pairs for 2 minutes on topics related to Discussion 1), students were paired up with a new classmate based on three experimental paradigms.

Second intervention, experiment #1: Observed changes

For the first experimental paradigm, students who displayed *similar* code-switching frequency during in-class interactions were put into pairs and their interactions were recorded by the instructor who took notes. For example, where possible, very heavy or heavy L1 users were paired up with other heavy L1 users and vice versa. As you can see in Table 2 below, and as one would expect, pairing up students of similar code-switching frequency did not discourage the frequency of L1 usage in the classroom. If anything, it encouraged this form of behavior.

Second intervention, experiment #2: Observed changes

For the second experimental paradigm, students were paired up with classmates who displayed a different code-switching frequency during in-class interactions. For example, heavy L1 users were paired up with medium or light L1 users.

The results of Experiment 2 were interesting. During this second dyadic interaction, Student A, who was usually a heavy L1 user but someone who also displayed a high level of participation in interactions, used the L1 much less. This was possibly due to the fact that Student B's (the partner) nationality is South Korean and is someone of limited Japanese proficiency, forcing Student A to speak in English, the pair's lingua franca. Originally, Student F was to be paired up with Student H but as Student H was absent, Student F was added to the Student E/I pairing to form a group of three. Interestingly, while Student E, normally a heavy L1 user, used the L1 much less during this interaction, Student F, normally a light L1 user, did use the L1 a little. Student I used the L1 very little during this exchange. Finally, in the third group, there was very little L1 usage/code-mixing at all, a promising result as Student G is normally a heavy L1 user.

Second intervention, experiment #3: Observed Changes

For the third and final paradigm for the second intervention, students who displayed a different code-switching frequency behavior but a similar degree of in-class participation were paired-up and notes were taken on their interactions.

Interestingly, while there was a large amount of code-mixing/L1 usage in the first pair (Student E and Student I), there was very little L1 usage in the second pair in which almost all of the interaction was conducted in the L2. The only difference between the parameters of these two groups is the level of participation. The third pair of students was once again a mix of heavy and light L1 users but this time both students typically displayed low levels of participation. As expected, there were very few utterances during this exchange but most utterances were made in the L2. Student B, normally a light L1 user, spoke only in the L2. Student D, normally a medium L1 user, used less code-mixing (only 1 utterance in the L1) during this interaction while Speaker G, normally someone who displays a high level of participation, did not interact much.

Second intervention: A summary

In ideal classroom settings, teachers hope that the majority of students will engage in the L2 (in this case English). Therefore, it logically follows that pairing up light L1 users who both display high levels of participation will theoretically lead to much interaction in the L2 but it is not always feasible to have such pairs in every class we teach. Based on the observations recorded in the author's teaching journal, the most effective pairings have been ranked in Table 1 while Table 2 shows the least effective pairings observed in class in terms of reducing the amount of L1 usage and raising the amount of L2 usage.

One interesting finding from these class observations was that when heavy L1 users were paired up with light L1 users who displayed a high level of participation, the light L1 user seemed to have a positive influence on the heavy L1 user, suggesting that pairing up students who display a different code-mixing frequency might be one beneficial way to reduce L1 usage in the classroom. This can be even more successful in reducing L1 usage when the pair does not share the same L1, forcing them to resort to an L2 (or L3) such as English which then serves as a *lingua franca* for communication. This was the case in my class in which one student's mother tongue was Korean.

Secondly, if the level of participation is higher in the student who tends to be the heavy L1 user (see Table 2 in the Appendix below), this may have the detrimental effect of encouraging the other student, usually a light L1 user, to engage more in the L1 to accommodate with his/her partner's preferred language modality (i.e. the L1). This was observed on several occasions over the course of the observations, implying that pairing up heavy L1 users with light L1 users is insufficient. There must be another determining factor which encourages L2 usage such as level of participation. This warrants further investigation in future observations or studies.

Third intervention: Points-and-rewards system

Finally, I hypothesized that a rewards-and-penalty system in which students 'Participation' scores were either positively or negatively affected by their L1/L2 usage in class, could be effective in the EDC class, a class which they should be instrumentally motivated (Gardner, 1988) to pass in their first year as students are unable to graduate without passing the course. Furthermore, as the teacher, I felt "the responsibility to create an environment that induced the students to talk in English" (Mori, 2004, p. 228).

During Week 11 (7^{th} journal entry), I introduced a new system in an attempt to drastically reduce the amount of L1 usage in class which became a problem again in Week 10, after much positive progress in Week 9.

The new point system which I introduced penalized students a point each time they made a full-sentence utterance in their L1. On the other hand, students were rewarded a point if, when participating as listeners in a discussion, they reminded or helped speakers move back into the

L2 (English) by making simple reminders or gestures to classmates through comments such as "in English please". The students' points were recorded in a tally-point system on the board next to the student's name. In Japanese society, people are often extremely self-conscious and anxious about being held responsible in any open or direct way (especially when the responsibility involves negative implications). Therefore, I hypothesized that this system would affectively encourage them to take responsibility for their own L1/L2 usage.

Based on the extremely high level of L2 usage in today's class, a dramatic improvement since last lesson, I believe that this new system was highly effective in reducing L1 usage in class. Student E who has been known to often code-switch back and forth between L1 and L2 only made one full-sentence L1 utterance throughout today's class and was therefore only penalized one point. Student D made one L1 utterance but by reminding Student E to speak in English, he also received one reward point and therefore had no points deducted this week for L1 usage overall. The only exception was Student A, who arrived almost 80 minutes into the lesson and made three L1 full-sentence utterances. This is probably due to the fact that she had missed the explanation about the new point system at the beginning of the class.

As this new system proved to be highly effective in generating an L2-only classroom atmosphere, I will continue to use this system in future classes.

IMPLICATIONS

The strategies employed by the instructor were what Dornyei (2005) refers to as "environmental control strategies", which aim to "eliminat[e] negative environmental influences and exploit[…] positive environmental influences" (Dornyei, 2005, p. 113). The author decided it would be appropriate to limit the scope of this paper to examining the impact of the influences which are "outside the individual" (Skehan, 1991, p. 281) by recording in-class observations either through taking notes on the spot about student-to-student interactions or through recording student interactions.

Up until the first Discussion Test, which students completed in Week 5, the instructor employed the first strategy of making direct reminders to students who were speaking in both English and Japanese to speak less in their L1 (Japanese) and more in their L2 (English). While this did sometimes work, temporarily, the author observed that students who had been given reminders would still revert back to their L1 later on in other interactions. Therefore, in summary, the first strategy was found to have only temporary benefits and no sustaining effect on students who regularly code-mixed. This finding supports Mori's assertion that "successful implementation of a staying-in-English rule involves more than simply telling the students to talk in English" (Mori, 2004, p. 234).

For the second intervention, both the second and third experiments in which I experimented with different pair- and group-combinations appeared to be effective. This suggests that pairing up students who display a different code-switching frequency behavior can be effective in reducing the amount of L1 usage and raising the amount of L2 usage in interactions. The findings also suggest that students who are more willing to use the L2 during class may have a positive influence on students who are known to code-mix frequently. The third paradigm also showed that the level of participation may be an important factor to consider too, as students displaying a high level of participation had a positive influence on classmates who typically do not participate as much in class.

During the third intervention, a rewards-and-penalty system also succeeded in encouraging students to speak more in their L2 (English). As mentioned, this successful result may be partly due to socioaffective factors in Japanese society. As students were directly rewarded or penalized on the whiteboard in front of their classmates, this may have encouraged

some of them to take more responsibility for their language choice (i.e. using either the L1 or L2).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, two out of the three interventions did appear to help reduce the amount of L1 usage and raise the level of L2 usage in class. The findings of this paper suggest that pairing up heavy L1 users with classmates who are more willing to use the L2 might be an effective way to reduce the frequency of L1 utterances in class. Moreover, a penalty-and-rewards system, especially in a country such as Japan where people are very conscious of responsibility, may also be another effective way to help motivate students to use more English (or L2) during class time. In future, further observations need to be made into how the levels of participation affect overall L1/L2 output.

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APPENDIX

Table 1*: Successful Student Pairings*

Student 1	Student 2	Amount of L2 Usage
1. Very heavy L1 user + High participation	Light L1 user (*different L1) + High participation	Very high
2. Very heavy L1 user + High participation	Light L1 user + High participation	High
3. Heavy L1 user + Low participation	Light L1 user + High participation	Medium

Table 2*: Unsuccessful Student Pairings*

Student 1	Student 2	Amount of L2 Usage
1. Very heavy L1 user + High participation	Heavy L1 user + High participation	Very low
2. Heavy L1 user + High participation	Light L1 user + Low participation	Low - Medium